

I Want to Know What Love Is by **CherishIsTheWord**

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Summary:

As El begins to learn about the world around her, she asks a hapless Mike to explain the concept of love.

I Want to Know What Love Is

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon. Cold and rainy, it was certainly too miserable to be going anywhere outside. For El and Mike, that was okay because they had each other's company. The two were lying on their stomachs on the basement carpet, Mike working away at some homework he neglected all weekend. El's reading was still limited to the concepts she understood, so she was spending time perusing stories with pictures accompanying the words. It was a comfortable silence.

El had been back a couple weeks now, and there was still a lot for her to learn about the world around her. Of course, a normal life was not something she could pick up all at once. With everyone else tied to school or work, El had time to look through books and watch television to help satiate her curiosity. Mike, of course, was there to help with any questions she might have, and he was always the first one she would ask.

Although always willing to ask when she didn't understand something people were talking about, now more than ever she was starting to come up with questions on her own. And today, El had a question biting at her brain. Ever the patient one, El waited until she saw Mike finishing up his work.

"Mike, what is love?"

Mike, of course, wasn't quite ready for that one, but he was at least thankful they were the only ones there at the moment.

"Oh, um, what, El?" he followed up, trying to buy himself a little time.

"What is love?" she asked innocently again. She followed it with a kind smile.

Really, he wasn't so much embarrassed as he was surprised she would ask a question like that out of the blue. I guess it was only a matter of time, he figured, as love was a theme that came up in so

many stories. But what should he say?

"Well, uh, it depends. It's a lot of things. I'm not sure how to explain it."

El looked at him uncertainly. Usually Mike had an answer for everything, so this love concept must be really complicated!

Though they had many conversations about friendship and, of course, he had kissed her last year before she went away, the L word had never come up. Now that they were safe and got to spend time together all the time, Mike hadn't really been sure how much he should express his feelings for El right away. But even if he could possibly get out of the tricky subject now, Mike couldn't stand to leave her hanging like that. And he'd hate for her to raise the same questions to somebody else. Maybe he could put it in another context.

"But I guess what it means is liking something a lot, more than almost anything else. Like, uh, eggos! You definitely love eggos. And I love..." Mike glances around the room. "...Star Wars. Make sense?"

"Yes," she replied, seeming satisfied with the answer. Mike relaxed as well. Through the depth of their conversation, both were now sitting up, Mike cross-legged and El sitting on her knees.

"I love you, Mike," she chimed again and Mike's eyes opened wide in surprise. If he had water in his mouth at that moment he would have spit it everywhere. Did he have to say it back now? Would El care? Still, he couldn't help but be charmed at the bluntness of her affection, so a smile crept on the corner of his mouth.

"I, I love you too, El," he offered quickly back, actually meaning it but trying to play it cool. He didn't want her to think it was a big deal. If she's asking about love, she probably isn't familiar with the convention or the significance of saying the L word.

El was, in fact, not expecting his response in return. Mike was just the definition of something she liked more than anything, and she simply wanted to share what she was feeling. But, to hear Mike say he loves

her too, well that warmed her heart.

Still, she was a bit hazy on some of the details.

“Do you love... friends?”

Uh oh, Mike thought. I guess he has to just put it all out there now.

"In a way, yes." Mike took a breath. Here we go. "You see, with people, love can mean a few different things. There's family, who you kind of have to love. For me, that's Mom, Dad, Holly, and even Nancy." Mike could see El tensing up a bit, probably recalling her Papa, so he felt he should clarify. "I mean, I don't have to love them. They still have to be, you know, good. There for you. Even if we don't always get along."

Nice going, Mike, he thought to himself sarcastically. He continued anyway. "And then I love my friends because they're cool people and friends care about each other."

El nods.

Maybe Mike could have stopped here. Mike and El were friends, of course, but he hoped they could be more. He wasn't necessarily planning to talk about it now, but he sensed there was never going to be a better opportunity.

"And then there's being in love with somebody. Romance. Like people who get married to each other and stuff."

El was especially curious at this last remark. She wasn't able to articulate this herself, but this 'ro-mans' seemed to be what she was really asking about. "How do you... be in love?"

"I dunno. It's not something you choose; it just kind of happens. When you're in love, you feel it."

"Have you?"

This was the road he wasn't prepared for this conversation to go

down. But there it lingered. On the one hand, of course he loved El. How could he not? Is he in love with her?

Neither of them fully realized how close to each other they were now. They couldn't avoid looking each other deep in the eye if they tried.

"A lot of people would say we're too young to be in love with anybody," Mike answered diplomatically.

"What do you... think it's like?"

"I don't really know."

El took this in stride, even if she looked somewhat unsatisfied. She understood that Mike didn't have all the answers. But this being in love thing, how would she know when it happens if she didn't know what it was?

Mike could see that El obviously had something on her mind that he hadn't covered. He didn't want the conversation to end on that note. Maybe it doesn't have to be a big deal? And so he let out some of the feelings he had been holding inside ever since she went away.

"But I think being in love feels like you care about that person more than anyone else in the world. You're lost without them, and you want to be with them whenever you can. They're special." Thinking of when he thought he had lost her almost brought him to tears, and the words came out far more passionately than he planned.

El looked at him curiously now, still so close to him. Mike could usually figure out what was on her mind with her expressive face, but at this moment he had no idea. Maybe he got carried away? He hoped he hadn't scared her. He didn't want to put her on the spot but he didn't know what else to do. He had to find out what she was thinking.

"Is everything alright, El? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

Something Mike didn't expect happened next. El quickly leaned

forward and their lips met, more passionate than the first time. El didn't quite know why she did it, but her instincts took over. Mike had done it to her once before, and she couldn't help but want to do it again.

"Okay?" she asked as she pulled away.

Mike was speechless in that moment, but she finally got the answer she was really looking for that day when Mike couldn't contain the biggest grin she had ever seen.

Author's Note:

Any comments or recommendations are welcome!